

All Things Considered...

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Carr/Hall and the CIA

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P JOHN HOCKENBERRY: In June of 1985, an American was put in prison in Costa Rica and Stephen Carr began talking to reporters about his involvement with a small circle of mercenaries fighting Sandinista troops in Southern Nicaragua. Carr became a major witness, providing information to investigators about alleged CIA involvement with the contra rebels based in Costa Rica at a time when such activity was outlawed by Congress.

Last month Stephen Carr was pronounced dead from an apparent drug overdose in Los Angeles.

NPR's Richard Gonzales reports.

RICHARD GONZALES: The Los Angeles County Coroner has yet to release a toxicology report that should explain the cause of 27 year old Stephen Carr's death last month.

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According to the police report, Carr died in a parking lot near his friend's apartment in Van Nuys where he had been staying. Carr had been out that night, returned home and in the pre-dawn hours began making noises. His bizarre behavior awoke his friends who took him outside where he collapsed in convulsions. The police say Carr died of a probable cocaine overdose.

By various accounts, Carr was a good kid or a habitual liar and drug abuser. Carr was known by his friends and family to be very paranoid and frightened. The source of his fears traced back to April 1985 when the Costa Rican government arrested him and four others on charges of illegal possession of explosives and violating Costa Rican neutrality.

After two months in prison, apparently feeling abandoned, Carr began to talk. He told one reporter, "I want everybody -- I want my family, I want my friends and I want the United States to know that we're not -- that we didn't come down here without anybody knowing about it, that we were supported a hundred percent from our government and a hundred percent from the Costa Rican government."

Carr spoke extensively about what he said was U.S. government aid for contra operations in Costa Rica and he named the names of key figures in the contra supply network.

One of the reporters he talked to was Tony Avergan.

TONY AVERGAN: He was particularly important to the investigations going on in the Congress in Washington concerning a particular shipment of arms from the Fort Lauderdale, Florida airport to Costa Rica because Steve Carr was the only person who actually rode with those arms. He was on the plane, passed through the Ilopango Military Airport in El Salvador and then came on to Costa Rica and was here in Costa Rica when the arms finally arrived. So he was unique in that respect.

GONZALES: That alleged shipment of arms is under investigation by the Special Prosecutor's Office looking into the Iran/contra arms affair.

Carr said the shipment of weapons from Fort Lauderdale, Florida to Costa Rica was arranged through a network of CIA operatives connected to the Cuban American Brigade 2506, a group of Bay of Pigs veterans and a mercenary group called Civilian Material Assistance. Both organizations were actively training contras to raid Sandinista positions from contra camps based in Costa Rica. Officials from Brigade 2506 and the CMA have denied any connection with the illegal arms shipment.

Carr's story is backed up by Jesus Garcia, another former participant in the contra supply network who is now in a Florida jail on a weapons possession charge.

According to a report released by the staff of Senator John Kerry, a central figure in the training and supplying of contras in Costa Rica, is American rancher John Hall. Carr told reporters that he knew Hall personally and that Hall bragged about his connections to the CIA and the National Security Council.

STEPHEN CARR: He was really open with us and told us how the CIA was helping him, how they had been helping him for three years and the National Security Council was allotting money, approximately ten thousand plus a month for food and weapons and whatever, for transportation.

GONZALES: Now, remember this is Carr speaking in June 1985, sixteen months before the downing of an American arms supply plane in Nicaragua and the capture of Eugene Hasenfus released a flood of information, long before anything was known about arms sales to Iran and the connection to U.S. aid to the contras.

Carr's attorney, Jerry Barry.

JERRY BARRY: At the beginning, I had serious doubts as to a

lot of the things Stephen was telling me, but since then -- since Hasenfus' arrest, since a lot of the other information that has been brought to the attention of the American public through the media, everything that he told me has been backed up by other sources.

GONZALES: Once he began talking to reporters, Carr became a key witness in a Costa Rican trial involving the plot to assassinate former contra leader Aden Pastora at a 1984 press conference in La Penca, Costa Rica. Carr had been scheduled to testify, but just before the trial date in May 1986, Carr disappeared. He resurfaced two weeks later in a Naples, Florida jail. There, Carr began telling anyone who would listen that the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica had arranged his escape from Costa Rica.

Stephen Carr's attorney, Jerry Barry.

BARRY: Stephen Carr told me that he was able to leave Costa Rica through the assistance of the American Embassy.

GONZALES: Carr's attorney and brother say that Carr told them that U.S. Embassy personnel gave him money and told him to, "Get the hell out of Dodge.".

Carr said Embassy officials told him he would face criminal charges if he stayed in Costa Rica and testified in the trial, but a spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica, Diane Stanley, denies Carr's version of the story.

DIANE STANLEY: The Consulate here at our Embassy had nothing to do with Carr's departure from Costa Rica.

GONZALES: Carr told his friends he crossed the Costa Rica/Panama border on foot, reported his passport as stolen, and was taken to the U.S. Embassy in Panama. His brother Edward says Stephen Carr told him that Embassy officials in Panama arranged his flight back to Florida.

EDWARD CARR: He said, "You won't believe this," he said, "They put me on a United States Air Force jet," like a C-141, like a cargo plane and flew him back to Miami and let him go and said here, make your own way back to Naples and turn yourself in to the police.

GONZALES: Upon arriving in Miami, Carr said he flew to Naples, Florida to turn himself over to police where he was wanted for probation violations stemming from a 1984 grand theft conviction.

While in the jail, Carr told his friends about the illegal weapons shipment, the mercenary operations and his story about how he escaped from Costa Rica.

Carr's brother also says that during his jail term, Stephen became increasingly fearful of threats against his life, begging his family to believe him when he said the CIA was going to kill him. In the interview conducted in June, 1985, Carr said he expected to be hit for divulging what he knew of U.S. Government involvement in contra operations.

EDWARD CARR: The John Hall, the Cuban 2506 Brigade and all these people, you know, they're fighting a war, so one more person sitting on the streets of Miami dead is no big problem for them.

GONZALES: Carr spent six months in the Naples, Florida jail. Four hours after his release, his family gave him a thousand dollars and sent him to Los Angeles to stay with his sister. His brother Edward says that while in California, Carr was using cocaine regularly. His death on December 13th did not surprise his family or friends, since they had begun to believe that Carr was in danger for being a man who knew too much and talked too much.

Carr was a product of a broken home and had volunteered for tours of duty with the Army first, then the Navy, then the Merchant Marines before joining the contra cause as a mercenary for very little pay, according to his friends. His brother Edward described him as an adventure loving, gung-ho type.

EDWARD CARR: I think he was after Communists. They told him the Sandinistas were Communists, so he was going to fight the Sandinistas. If they told him people from New Jersey were Communists, he would have fought people from New Jersey.

STEPHEN CARR: I'm down here because I wanted to be and I wanted to fight the Sandinistas. I didn't go to Vietnam. I wanted to go to Vietnam, so that's my reason.

GONZALES: Before his death, Carr was a candidate for testimony before Congressional committees investigating the Iran/contra arms affair. Congressional investigators say his testimony was important for substantiating claims that the Administration was providing military support to the contras during a period when such aid was prohibited by Congress. He was also expected to testify on the alleged link between American rancher John Hall, activist Robert Owen, and Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, the key network in supplying arms to the contras in Costa Rica.

Carr's brother Edward says that in the days before his death, Carr repeatedly expressed the fear that he would be assassinated.

Ed, how do you think your brother wants to be remembered?

EDWARD CARR: I think he wants to be remembered as a patriot who tried to do something for this country and found out this country was pulling some dirty operations in Nicaragua and killing innocent people.

GONZALES: Detective Mel Arnold of the Los Angeles Police Department says that toxicology reports in Los Angeles County routinely take six to eight weeks to complete. Carr died just one month ago. Detective Arnold says that while there is no evidence of foul play, the possibility that Carr was murdered cannot be ruled out entirely until the toxicology report is released.